

DOES Purdah Impede National Progress ?

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English Version
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Revision
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Bismillah ir Rahman ir Raheem

(On 2nd March 1955 an All-Pakistan Inter-Collegiate Debate was held in Nishtar Medical College, Multan. The topic for discussion was: "In the Opinion of this House, 'Purdah Impedes National Progress'". Parveen Rizvi, a 3rd Year student of Multan College for Women won the first prize in this debate. It is noteworthy that she asked leave to speak behind the curtain, but could not get permission so she made her speech wearing a *Chadar*. From her speech, which follows, one can see how logical all her arguments were. When the debate ended and the opinion of the House was asked, an overwhelming majority voted in favour of purdah while on the other side there were no more than 1% votes.)

Does purdah impede national progress or not? To settle this question we must first determine what purdah is, because without doing so we cannot understand and appreciate its purpose, its advantages, and its drawbacks. Next we must determine the nature of that progress which we want to achieve, because without doing so we can never ascertain whether purdah is a hinderance to it or not. The word '*Purdah*' is a literal translation of the Arabic word *Hijab*. The word *Hijab* appears in the Quranic verse wherein God forbids free and unchecked entry into the house of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) and ordains that if anyone has to ask any thing of the women of the house he should ask from behind the curtain (*Hijab*). With this decree the regulations concerning *Purdah* were announced and all such injunctions came to be known as the commandments of *Purdah* or *Hijab*.

The details of these commandments appear in the 24th and 33rd Chapters (*Surahs*) of the Holy Quran. Women are required to stay at home with dignity and to refrain from flaunting their beauty and adornment as was the practice of women in the Age of Ignorance. When they go out they must cover themselves with a mantle (*Chadar*) and avoid wearing noisy, jingling jewellery that attracts attention as it is strictly forbidden out of doors. Even at home they should discriminate between close blood relations or spouses (*mehram*) and those who have no such blood relations i.e. *na-mehram*. They must avoid any show or display of their adornments such as jewellery, cosmetics, or attractive clothes before anyone except their husbands or close blood relations i.e. *mehrams*, domestic servants and women of their acquaintance. Women are also required to adequately cover their bosoms with their mantles and conceal their *satar*, that is part of the body which ought to be concealed

even from *mehrams*. The believers are supposed to ask for permission before entering the apartments of their mothers and sisters to avoid sudden or accidental exposition of such of their beauties as is to be concealed even from their *mehrams* except spouses.

These are the Quranic injunctions concerning purdah. The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him), by way of explaining them, said that the whole body of the woman except the face, the hands upto the wrist and the feet upto the ankles, is *Satar* which should be concealed even from brothers and fathers. No transparent or tight dress that exposes the beauties of the body is permissible for the believing womenfolk. The Prophet (peace be upon him) also prohibited women from sharing solitude with any man apart from her *mehram* kin, and forbade the use of perfume by women when going outside the house. He allocated separate sections for men and women in the mosque and they were not allowed to mix up even during the prayers. He made it a point to sit and wait in the mosque after *Salat* (Prayers) until all the women had left.

Whoever wishes to look up for these commands may consult Surah Noor and Surah Ahzab of the Holy Quran and any authentic book of Hadith. What we call purdah today may have become exaggerated or attenuated in practice, but the rules and procedures are the same that were adopted in the Muslim society of Medina. I do not wish to silence anyone by using the names of Allah and His Prophet but I cannot help saying that the slogan that Purdah is an impediment and obstacle to our national progress is nothing but a clear symptom of our hypocritical thinking and doublemindedness. Such thinking tantamounts to a sort of vote of no-confidence against Allah and His Prophet (peace be upon him) and an aspersion that Allah and the holy Prophet (peace be upon him) have set up impediments in our way to progress. If such is our opinion indeed, why do we insist on posing as Muslims, and why do we not simply refuse to believe in Allah and the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) who have perpetrated such dreadful 'injustice' on us? This question cannot be brushed off by saying that

Note: *Mehrams* are those close blood relations with whom marriage is not allowed. Such relations have clearly been declared in Surah Noor. *Na-Mehrams* are all those who do not fall under the category of *Mehrams*.

Allah and His Prophet (peace be upon him) have not ordained purdah. I have clearly stated what purdah is, and it is open to anybody to go through the detailed instructions about it in the Holy Quran and authentic collections of Hadith. Even if anyone dares deny the authenticity of any Hadith, how can he ignore the clear commandments of the Quran itself?

If we ponder a while over the commandments of Islam regarding purdah, we find that it has three main objectives, namely:

- (1) To protect the morality of men and women, and uproot the evils that arise in a mixed society due to the free social contacts of men and women.
- (2) To separate the respective spheres of male and female activity in order to enable women to execute their responsibilities in peace and similarly to enable men to discharge their duties undisturbed.
- (3) To make the order of the home strong, to strengthen the institutions of home and the family and make them secure and well-knit, for it is no less-rather greater in importance than any other institution in any sphere of our life. Those who have tried to ensure security of home and the family without acknowledging the institution of *purdah* have virtually reduced woman to the status of a slave denying all her rights. Those who acknowledge the rights of women but do not believe in purdah, sooner or later find the institution of family and home withering and collapsing in consequence. Islam confers upon women their full rights and, furthermore, wishes to keep secure the institution of the home and family. This end cannot be achieved without the support of the commandments of purdah and the protection provided by it.

Ladies and Gentlemen: I request you to assess these objectives with a cool and impartial mind, I have nothing to convince those who do not believe in any morals or ethics, but would appeal to the good sense of those who believe in ethics and morality to admit the undeniable

ate. Moreover she should also spare time to sing and dance for the entertainment of the opposite sex. You burden her with so much responsibilities that she cannot do justice to any of these duties. She is required to do what is not compatible with her nature and physique and drag her in all fields of activity. You force her into fields where she is not in a position to compete with men, where man will always outstrip her; where she will get appreciation not because of her talents and struggle but because of her beauty and sexual attraction which is the basic demand of so-called progress.

The basic institutions of home and family, whose importance you have overlooked in your enthusiasm for progress are the factories where human beings are reared, trained, and prepared to lead the world. Obviously they are no less important than any shoe-factory or textile mill. Nature has blessed women, above all, with the abilities, psychological traits and qualities that are needed to run these factories. Most of the burden of duties, pains, and responsibilities essential to run these factories, has been placed upon the tender shoulders of women. It is such a tremendous task that anyone who has a mind to do this job conscientiously would not get even a moment to spare. Moreover, the greater the ability, efficiency, intelligence and devotion behind the working of this institution i.e. home, the better the human stuff it would produce. Women need better and appropriate education for this purpose.

Islam has set up the disciplinary institution of purdah to enable women to work with full attention and concentration without any sort of disturbance, interference and confusion relieving men with full confidence and sense of security. Now you wish to demolish this discipline in the name of progress. Eliminating the institution of Purdah, if you succeed in doing so, you will have either of the two alternatives: reduce woman to the status of slave as done by Hindu culture or the old Christian and Jewish civilizations to save the family system from disintegration, or let the most vital and invaluable institution of man-making perish and provide tame labour to let your factories and industries flourish.

Let me say that you cannot save the institution of home and family from total ruin if you ignore the social disciplines introduced

and enforced by Islam and yet claim to confer on them all the legal and economic rights given to the women by Islam. Whatever be your concept of progress, keep one thing in mind as to what you are going to get and what you stand to lose.

Progress is a word having a very large canvas of interpretations and implications; it cannot be confined to any fixed or limited meaning and interpretation. The Muslims have once ruled over a major portion of the world population and a vast region stretching from Indian Ocean to the Atlantic, when they were the torch-bearers of Science and Philosophy and the unchallenged leaders of the world in the field of civilization.

I am not aware whether this tremendous contribution of Islam is termed progress in any dictionary or not. If this was progress, and undoubtedly it was, I declare that this progress was achieved by a society which strictly observed and maintained purdah. Islamic history is a brilliant record of a galaxy of distinguished saints and sages, statesmen and administrators, judges and jurists, scholars and scientists, generals and conquerors. These illustrious figures of history were certainly brought up by ignorant mothers.

Besides, we find in Islamic history the names of female scholars of great calibre and repute who mastered science, arts and literature. Purdah never prevented the Muslims from attaining such progress and it shall never hinder in attaining excellence in any field of their domain. But if in anyone's opinion progress merely means the progress achieved by the West in the form of free mixing of sexes and crossing all limits of ethics and decency, no doubt purdah impedes it relentlessly and, with purdah, that sort of progress can never be achieved.

But never forget that the West had achieved this progress by staking and jeopardizing its morality as well as its institution of family. The West has dragged woman out of her sphere of activity and thrown her into the arena of masculine activity. No doubt they have succeeded in multiplying their manpower in their offices and factories which is apparently a big stride towards progress, but in fact they have lost the peace of their home and family life.

Even today if there are homes in the West that have kept their heads above water, they owe their success solely to housewives. Women who work and earn with men do not and can not run their homes properly. Their marriages are ending in divorces, their children are being ruined. They take refuge in clubs and hotels because the home is no more a Paradise or bliss for them. They have abandoned the invaluable and sacred function of rearing a better and worthier generation to take their place. Even then if anyone aspires for such progress, he is free to do so and face its consequence.

